Former Ames employee William "Bill" Mersman dies

William A. Mersman died peacefully at Stanford Hospital on Sept. 8. "Bill," as he liked to be called, was born on April 3, 1914 in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. His family moved to southern California when he was seven. He majored in math and physics at CalTech, where he won the CalTech Travel Prize and sailed to Europe by steamer through the Panama Canal in 1933. He earned his Ph.D. in math at CalTech in 1935.

William Mersman

Mersman's first teaching position was at Deep Springs, a two-year men's college in the Sierra Nevada. From 1939 to 1945, he taught math at California Agricultural College (now UC Davis); served on secret teams (during World War II) developing radar at Brown, MIT, and in England; and worked briefly in industry.

Mersman found his true calling and professional home as a research scientist at Ames, where he worked from 1947 until his retirement in 1974. As section head for Analog Computation in the Theoretical Aerodynamics Branch, he acquired and managed the operation of the first analog computer, used to study missile trajectories. Within a couple of years, the digital computation world had begun to unfold with the introduction of the IBM card-programmed calculator. This resulted in the formation of the Electronic Computing Machines Branch in 1953 with Mersman as chief.

It was in this environment that Mersman found his niche. Working with personnel from the wind tunnels and Center instrumentation staff, Mersman helped to establish the first automatic data acquisition and reduction program at Ames in 1955. He was responsible for the acquisition, installation and operation of all digital computational systems at the Center from 1952 to 1966. During this time, more than nine new digital computational systems were acquired, representing IBM, Honeywell and Burroughs. Each system significantly enhanced the research and data acquisition and reduction capabilities at Ames, while establishing sophisticated operational and user-friendly environments. Mersman's skills at numerical analysis and mathematics were invaluable as he developed computational techniques for digital computers.

With the advent of the space race, requirements for studying vehicle orbits, ablation rates and re-entry problems became key issues for the Center. Mersman subsequently found a new arena for his skills as he broke ground in problem formulation for orbital theory and celestial mechanics. Research scientists were grappling with the problems of space research and flight, as well as the opportunities that digital computation presented. Mersman became their primary consultant as he worked with them to optimize their equations for computation. His contributions were noted in many joint publications with those research scientists.

Mersman's work won him international recognition as well. In the 1950s and '60s, he presented papers on orbital theory and celestial mechanics in Amsterdam, Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paolo. His studies made possible the prediction of satellite orbits.

Although Mersman was retired for 30 years before his death, much of his work formed the foundation for the computational activity of Ames. He was a critical resource for the Center when the page was blank, and his efforts were an early force in helping Ames become a leading computational center in the nation, as demonstrated by the Office of Information Sciences and Technology.

The pioneer in celestial mechanics spent his retirement years walking all the trails in the Bay Area hills and shorelines. For many years, he and his wife also took annual hiking trips to the British Isles, Switzerland and Austria.

Mersman is survived by his wife, Evelyn, of Pilgrim Haven in Los Altos; his daughters, Patricia Mersman and Megan Mersman-Black; Megan's sons, Theo and Doug Black; and nephews, James Mersman and Ross Mersman, Jr. He will long be remembered for his crusty manner, his ever-present sense of humor, and his generous spirit.

'Women of Color' recognizes Tianna Shaw

Tianna Shaw of the Payload and Facilities Engineering Branch (Code SLE) was recently honored as the 'Young Professional for 2004' at the National Women of Color Technology Awards conference. The conference, held in October in Atlanta, Ga., is a yearly event designed to encourage women of color to pursue excellence in technology. Many past and current recipients of Women of Color Technology Awards are top managers and key decision makers for Fortune 500 companies.

The selection of Shaw for this award is a tribute to her professional development and to her accomplishments at NASA Ames. Shaw, of Native American descent, has been the manager of the Life Sciences Division's (SL's) Acceleration Facilities since August 1999. Along with a team of civil servants and contractors, she supports extramural and intramural hypergravity research using Code SL's array of centrifuges and linear sleds. Forty-seven peer-reviewed Life Sciences publications have been associated with this work during the past five years.

BY JOHN CONNOLLY

Tianna Shaw seen here with her husband, Ross, during the recent National Women of Color Technology Awards Conference held in October in Atlanta, Ga. Shaw was presented with the '2004 Young Professional Award' during a breakfast ceremony.